

Life, Death, New Life: Profound Words from Bishop Sheen

In one of his Easter homilies, Bishop Sheen brought out that Easter deals with death, death that leads to new life and that, in fact, there is no new life without death. Bishop Sheen then went on to show how our Lord's death and Resurrection has recurred in the Church throughout history. Here is an excerpt from that Easter homily:

From Bishop Sheen:

“Mary [Magdalen] walked in the garden and someone near her spoke a word, and pronounced it longingly, wistfully, in that touching and unforgettable voice which had called her so many times: “Mary.” And to this one and only word, she made an answer, a word and only one: “Rabboni.” And as she fell at His knees in the dewy grass and clasped in her hands those bare feet, she saw two scars, two red-lined marks of nails — for Christ was now walking in the glory of His new Easter morn.

That was the first Easter Day. Centuries have whirled away since, and on this new Easter Day as I turn from that garden to the altar, I behold placed over the tabernacle, on this Resurrection Day, the image, not of a Risen Savior, but the image of a dying one, to teach me that Christ lives over again in His Church, and that the Church, like Christ, not only lives, not only dies, but always rises from the dead. She is in love with death as a condition of birth; and with her, as with Christ, unless there is a Good Friday in her life, there will never be an Easter Sunday; unless there is the crown of thorns there will never be the halo of light; and unless there is the Cross there will never be the empty tomb. In other words, every now and then the Church must be crucified by an unbelieving world and buried as dead, only to rise again. She never does anything but die, and for that peculiar reason she never does anything but live. Every now and then the very life seems to have gone out of her; she is palled with death; her blood seems to have been sapped out of her; her enemies seal the tomb, roll a stone in front of her grave, and say: The Church will never rise again! But somehow she does rise again.

At least a dozen times in history, the world has buried the Church and each time she has come to life again. I shall mention but a few such instances....[In the early Church] Roman swords blunted by massacre no longer fit their sheaths; the wild beasts overfed on the living flesh of the Church lost their craving for food — but still the bloody warfare went on. Caesar was certain he had conquered. He rejoiced that the Church was dead. Her life was sapped and drained; she could never survive the Roman sword. A stone was rolled before the door. The Church would never rise again. And as they set their watch, and even as they watched, the Church like her Risen Savior came from the grave of the Catacombs and was seen walking in the glory of her new Easter Morn.

There came other moments in her history when in the eyes of the world she seemed to have her very life drained out of her. Whenever the Palm Sundays of earthly rejoicing came her way, and the world proclaimed her Queen, and strewed palm branches beneath her feet — in a word, whenever a great measure of temporal prosperity came her way, and she began to rely more upon action than prayer, she became weak. The yoke of Christ then seemed heavy to her children; bodies craved for the line of least resistance and hearts yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt. It is a strange but certain fact that the Church is never so weak as when she is powerful with the world; never so poor as when she is rich with the riches of the world; never so foolish as when she is wise with the fancies of the world. She is strongest with Divine Help when she is weakest with human power, for like Peter she is given the miraculous draught of fishes when she admits by her own power she has labored all the night and taken nothing.

When her discipline, her spirit of saintliness, her zeal for Christ, her vigils, and her mortifications, become a thing of less importance, the world makes the fatal mistake of believing that her soul is dead and her faith is departed. ...But the world, failing to make this distinction between the Divine and the human in her, as it failed to make it in Christ, takes her for dead. To the world, her very life seems spent, her heart pierced, her body drained; in its eyes she is just as dead as the Master when taken down from the cross, and there is nothing left to do but to lay her in the sepulchre. Once more a great stone is rolled before her tomb; the official seal of death placed upon it, the watch set; but as they watched saintliness came back, Christ stirred in Peter's bark, and at the very moment men were saying she was dead, she was seen walking in the glory of her new Easter Morn.

Then came our own times and with it another death. Her death this time was inflicted not by executioners, but by other Pilates. These were dangerous days, for any civilization is in a bad way when it becomes indifferent, like another Pilate, to the answer to the question: "What is Truth?" From inside and outside of the Church sprang up that old Greek error that there is no truth — an error which, for want of a knowledge of its ancient ancestry, was called Modernism. Truth was derationalized, error rationalized, and proofs brought forward to prove all proofs worthless. Teachers who bedecked themselves in the robes of prophets became insulted if told they were not gentlemen, but remonstrated mildly if told they were not Christians. Minds now were told, and they began to believe, with the force of repetition, that we must be indifferent to both error and truth; that it is a lack of broad-mindedness to make up one's mind; that it makes no difference whether God exists, whether Christ is God, or whether the Sacraments do actually communicate Divine Life — the only thing that matters is the subjective impression such beliefs have upon the feeling of the believer. Minds began to live by catchwords, phrases covered up loose thinking, and there was hardly an ear that did not hear such catchwords and phrases as "Life is bigger than logic," and "The Christ of Faith is not the Jesus of History."

The new spirit of the age was seemingly burying the Spirit of Christ. Books and articles were shot from the press. In 1907 there hardly was an article written that did not say that the Church had now definitely reached its end. The world was asked to chant her Requiem; a great stone was rolled before the door of her tomb; the watch set. She would never rise again. And according to every human law she never should have risen from the dead! But for some mysterious reason the Giant stirred. War was on. Long-range guns were tearing great gaping wounds in majestic Cathedrals; ploughshares were beaten into swords; cannon fire changed poppy fields into Haceldamas of blood. And lo and behold! That which was thought dead was seen on the battlefields pressing a crucifix to dying lips; and when the smoke of battle cleared and the mist lifted, she was seen walking in the glory of her new Easter Morn; and even now as men watch her she grows! Christ, then, must have meant what He said when He declared that His Church would endure even to the consummation of the world.

There emerges, then, from her history one great and wonderful lesson and it is this: Christ rose from the dead, not because He is man, but because He is God. The Church rises from the sepulchre in which violent hands or passing errors would inter her, not because she is human, but because she is Divine. Nothing can rise from the dead except Divinity. The world should profit by experience and give up expecting the Church to die. If a bell had been tolled on a thousand different occasions and the funeral never took place, men would soon begin to regard the funeral as a joke. So it is with the Church. The notice of her execution has been posted but the execution has never taken place. Science killed her and still she was there. History interred her, but still she was alive. Modernism slew her, but still she lived. She will go on dying and living again and in each recurring cycle of a Good Friday and an Easter Sunday her one aim in life will be to preach Christ and Him Crucified."

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These are profound insights from one of the great teachers of the faith from our own country. For the meek and humble of heart, they are words of hope. Yes, our times look dark, so did Good Friday and Holy Saturday to the Apostles; there is always a Resurrection. For those who have a hatred of God and His Church, they are a warning — you are only kicking the goad, God cannot be overcome. To those who have no hatred per se of God or His Church but have slid into indifference — I don't really believe, I can take it or leave it — it is a call to repent and return. The desire to be eternal, to be free of death, is embedded within us. There is a way, but only one way and the Lord, not me or my philosophy or anything else, sets the way. Has my Mass attendance been slacking? Has it been a long time since my last Confession? Have I never really strived to know the faith, our Lord, better and better? Do I have no habit of personal prayer on a daily basis? Look back to your true home here on earth, the Church. She will guide you with her sacraments, her teachings, her devotions. Put aside the lie that the Church is a mere human organization whose death is at hand. Rise up and be counted amongst the only ones that will be truly victorious, victorious by the power of Christ. Easter is the "victory over death" that our Lord promises to all who truly seek Him.

A Happy and Blessed Easter to all.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.